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ABSTRACT

This paper provides educators with information about the development of a literature-based unit for middle-grade students dealing with the Medieval period and Asian cultures, thereby creating interest in the content materials through the use of fiction and nonfiction materials. The paper's purpose is to encourage educators to use a literature-based focus to create a variety of situations within the classroom that can lead to ongoing research about students' metacognitive strategies, interest in reading, and shared information across grades. Materials in the paper include lists and examples of the literature used with the students, guidelines for developing questioning strategies, and the framework used in working with the various reading levels of the students. The paper also contains an appendix on social studies literature "focus units"; another appendix on guidelines for developing questioning strategies; a list of the 25 books used for the various units; and a figure illustrating major book choices with a breakdown according to recommended reading levels. (Author/RS)

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This article will provide educators with information about the development of a literature based unit for middle grade students dealing with the Medieval Period and Asian Cultures, thereby creating interest in the content materials through the use of fiction and non-fiction materials.

Its purpose is to encourage educators to use a literature based focus to create a variety of situations within the classroom that can lead to ongoing research about students' metacognitive strategies, interest in reading, and shared information across grades.

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Trade Book Significance: The Spice for Content Area Usage

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Running head: Spice for Content Area Usage

Trade Book Significance:
The Spice for Content Area Usage

"Social studies is not my best teaching area, and my students don't like it." After hearing this comment I set out to show a colleague that not only can it be her best area, but that her class of sixth graders would surprise her. Providing the impetus through development of a literature focus unit and whetting the students' appetites through selected literature were to be the keys employed.

As a teacher educator I require my students to develop literature units based upon my teaching experiences and ideas proposed by Joy Moss (1984). The units although excellent on paper, afforded me no timely opportunity to witness their effect in the field. Implementation is an important factor and I was determined to plan and carry a unit to completion, otherwise I couldn't honestly assess a unit's true worth or success.

I approached a teaching colleague in my former school district, Sandy, to implement a research activity with and for me. Knowing her feelings about social studies, I felt this would be the ideal avenue for experimentation. She asked Evelyn, teaching the same grade in another school, to join her effort and provide support. Jointly they decided to apply for a

school system mini-grant in order to purchase books for this activity.

While waiting to learn if the project would be accepted, we perused the Social Studies text to determine the areas, objectives and concepts to be developed. Additionally we had to decide upon cross-school experimentation and student exchange (see Appendix A). Once they were notified of their $500 mini-grant, I assumed the role of book purchaser based on their topic choices and reading levels. The following chart indicates major book choices with a breakdown according to recommended reading levels (see Figure One).

Insert Figure One about here

Since youth have little recognition of other cultures, I explained to Sandy and Evelyn that the integration of literature and social studies was an appropriate avenue to implement a program because "the thread of people's lives weaves through the past, the present, and into the future (Norton, 1991, p. 474)." I viewed our project as one of encouraging student understanding while developing their critical thinking skills.

My first course of action was to give Sandy and Evelyn a

refresher course in implementing questioning strategies. As teachers we always ask questions but often forget to vary the levels needed to effect higher levels of thinking skills. Since this was to be a major goal of the project it was imperative that the same questioning hierarchy be implemented in both classrooms (see Appendix B).

My role proved to be three pronged: consultant; collaborator; and most important, support system. Sandy and Evelyn are seasoned teachers, yet embarking on a new venture created the need for extra support. They needed to hear from an impartial person that "yes" their ideas, methods, and techniques were sound. They expected to see "immediate" excitement from their students, not realizing that for these sixth graders the road was new and they, also, would tread cautiously.

Sandy's class broke ground in the Medieval Period by reading "The Door in the Wall." The students enjoyed the reading and became immersed in the vocabulary, as well as excited by the then and now comparisons and contrasts of life. Evelyn's group initiated their study of the Asian Culture by reading the "House of Sixty Fathers," with her students equally excited.

The questions developed during their whole group and

individualized reading sessions were placed on charts for all to see and refer to as they read. A rising level of questioning sophistification could be viewed as they began letter exchanges with their counterparts at the other school. They challenged one another to find out what had been learned, and what they should learn from these materials.

Two early comments surfaced after speaking with Sandy and Evelyn, "My students want to take their books home," and "They're sneaking and reading ahead." This was a significant discovery for students who previously would rather not read a trade book. A number of students even took it upon themselves to bring in additional library books, information, and home projects. Each group embarked on projects that were both teacher and group driven, with a sampling as follows:

Sandy's Projects	Evelyn's Projects
Soap carving	Haiku
Shields - family/personal	Masks
Walter Dragun's town recreated	Temple building
Weapons	Weapons
Vocabulary lists	Sampan building
Question development	Fable writing
Medieval feast	Cooperative sharing

As the units came to an end, I visited each classroom to informally assess student attitudes and learning. Since the teachers had no advance knowledge of my questions, there was no possibility for prior student study. I observed the following commonalities among both groups:

-Their topic knowledge was broad in scope.

-They were proud of their knowledge

-They liked the use of the trade books.

-They felt confident in what they had achieved

-They enjoyed working collaboratively (within the room)

-They were eager to share their knowledge (across schools)

-The questions they raised ranged from the what, to the why and how.

A comment that I consider reflective of literature use came from one student who stated, "Gee, Dr. Bercik, thanks for choosing these books. I never knew you could learn so much from them. I only thought our text books could teach us about other countries and people, but these books made me feel like I was in their skin." This student's perceptions were echoed by others, in both classes, but he summed it best.

Sandy, Evelyn, and I, gathered a wealth of knowledge from this experience, that:

-students can both learn and enjoy the process.

-we must be well-planned and organized to realize our goals.

-the exchange of ideas creates cross pollinization for both students and teachers.

-literature is a viable and important aspect to create interest in social studies.

-students are capable of obtaining major concepts through well-planned and executed collaborative efforts.

-modeling questioning strategies provides students with the knowledge to develop their own.

The students made us more cognizant of our active role in the process, as their conduits to learning. We knew that our efforts were successful because the students felt confident in sharing information, retaining it, and building upon it. They had a better idea of what to do and how to do it, as evidenced by their posttests. We found they went from no knowledge about the chosen topics to specific knowledge, including the listing of culture, foods, lives, religion, and education as learning areas for the Medieval period. The same categories were reiterated for the Asian cultures, but they added new areas: government, geography, and personal qualities. We found it

interesting to hear them question why the poor couldn't receive an education; that in the Asian culture parents are considered a child's first and most important teacher; and that Asian parents consider children to be of great import. These are perceptions not evidenced in textbooks nor discussed by us, but implied within the trade books.

Overall, Sandy and Evelyn's students achieved and surpassed hoped for objectives. They discovered that trade books provide additional information, that reading is exciting, and that they could formulate questions that challenge and stretch their comprehension. In their class correspondences they experienced the importance of creating a link, sharing the excitement of living in the historical past, and learning how these tied in with the history of the present.

Taking stock of our successes, we looked to our needs for the coming school year and were in agreement that there must be ongoing dialogue, an expansion of ideas and topics, followed by a continual assessment of the process. As collaborator, I found the words of Sandy and Evelyn to be significant because they both stated, "Next year we plan on...."

I also became aware that the challenge I created could be likened to planting a seed, nurturing it, and watching it bloom.

Reviewing my initial objective, I can say with confidence that assigning literature focus units to education majors is both realistic and practical. In the classroom, these units can be applied to any content area where they become a powerful tool serving as a catalyst to learning.

References

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Norton, D. (1991). Through the eyes of a child: An introduction to children's literature. Third edition. NY: Mcmillan Publishing Company. p.474.

Appendix A

Social Studies Literature Focus Unit Information

Rationale:

Focus units were created "to expand comprehension skills and literary interest (Moss, 1984)." This unit was created to build upon these assumptions and to add to students' interest in the areas of medieval history and the Asian cultures by utilizing literature, both fiction and non-fiction, that dealt with these areas.

General purposes:

To motivate students through the use of literature.

To provide a base for students to understand that literature can and does offer an historical perspective.

To create a basis for students to analyze content based books and literature.

To encourage students to become thoughtful readers who are able to develop understandings of history and its relationship to the world in which they live.

Teacher objectives:

To develop students metacognitive strategies.

To provide information about the relationship between content reading and literature.

To encourage students to share information collaboratively.

To develop questioning strategies that will involve higher levels of student thinking.

To help students understand that:

-history is the basis for many things in our lives today.

-the Asian culture is an ancient one that may be traced throughout civilization.

-during the medieval period people began the changes that led to the development of modern times.

-the ways in which people lived throughout the world are and were influenced by their circumstances.

-many of the problems facing us today are the same as those of yesterday but to lesser or greater degrees.

Creative writing and expression activities to consider:

Creation of fable.

Write how it felt to live in medieval times.

Create a comparison map of life in Asia and the middle ages.

Develop a frieze of this time period.

Research famous warriors, knights, scientists.

Write poetry - Haiku, Senyru, etc.

Create a map.

Host a medieval feast // create an Asian meal.

Appendix B

Guidelines for Developing Questioning Strategies

Setting the stage:

Look at the cover; discuss what it has on it and what it might be about.

Basic fact questions:

These questions usually answer the big four--WHO, WHAT, WHEN, and WHERE. Here we're just finding out if they can answer exactly what we said to them as we were reading.

NOTE: It is important that we remind ourselves and our students that they answer questions using a part of the question.

Implied meaning questions:

These questions are looking at how the characters feel, why they did what they did, and what their thoughts might be.

Story appreciation questions:

The questions in this area center on why the author might have written the story, or what kind of story this is. You should encourage the students to think of alternatives to the way a story/chapter ended.

Analysis of the story:

This area helps stimulate students to think beyond the

story line and start to make connections with other stories they may have read or heard, or for that matter viewed on TV.

Evaluation of the story:

The questions in this area encourage students to relate and identify with the characters in the story. Here they try and step into the shoes of the characters and maybe gain a little insight into their own lives and decide whether something is right or wrong. This is a difficult thing to do, and many may not be ready for this stage, but you should encourage and stimulate this area.

Types of Questioning Strategies:

Detail questions ask for bits of information conveyed by the material. Although it is important for our students to know these answers, very little depth of comprehension is necessary to answer them correctly.

Vocabulary questions ask for the meanings of words used in the selection. They check the student's understanding of word meaning.

Sequence questions require knowledge of events in their order of occurrence. These check the student's knowledge of the order in which events occurred in the story.

Main idea questions ask the students to identify the central theme of the selection. These help them become aware of details and the relationships among them.

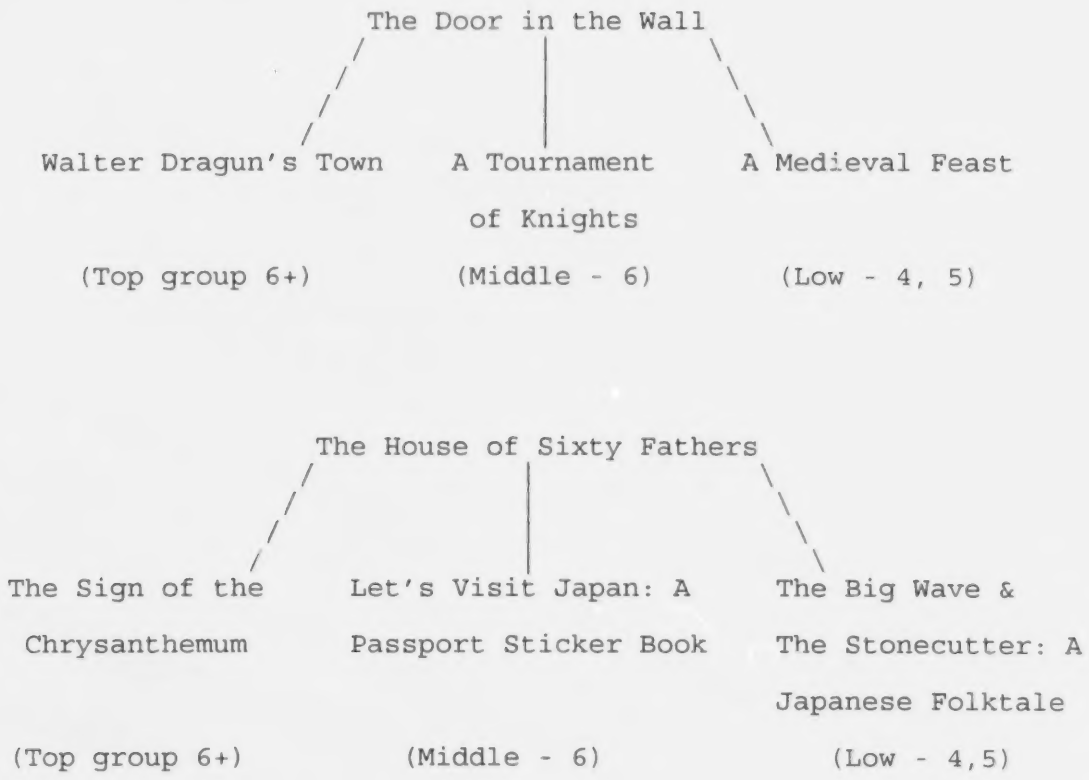
Inference questions ask for information that is implied but not directly stated in the material. These require students to read between the lines, and involve higher level thinking.

Evaluation questions ask students for judgments about the material they read. Although these judgments are inferences, they depend upon more than the information implied or stated by the story. The student must have enough experience related to the situation to establish standards for comparison.

Creative response questions ask the students to go beyond the material and create new ideas based on the ideas they have read and helps create excellent class discussions.

Figure 1.

Books used and grade levels.


The Door in the Wall
Walter Dragun's Town
A Tournament of Knights
A Medieval Feast
(Top group 6+)
(Middle - 6)
(Low - 4, 5)
The House of Sixty Fathers
The Sign of the Chrysanthemum
Let's Visit Japan: A Passport Sticker Book
The Big Wave & The Stonecutter: A Japanese Folktale
(Top group 6+)
(Middle - 6)
(Low - 4,5)

Literature Books Used for the Medieval Period

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deAngeli, Marguerite. (1989). *The Door in the Wall.* Dale Yearling Book. Original Copyright: (1949).

Lasker, Joe. (1989). *A Tournament of Knights.* NY: Harper & Row/Trophy Book.

Sacha, Sheila. (1987). *Walter Dragun's Town: Crafts and Trade in the Middle Ages.* NY: Thomas Y. Crowell.

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Lim, John. (1981). *Merchants of the Mysterious East*. Canada: Tundra Books.

Shifeng, Zheng., et al. (1980). *China: All Provinces and Autonomous Regions*. NY: Gallery Books/McGraw-Hill.

Yep, Lawrence. (1989). *The Rainbow People*. NY: Harper & Row.

Resource Books for Use With Either Literature Focus Unit

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Giblin, James C. (1987). *From Hand to Mouth: or How We Invented Knives, Forks, Spoons, and Chopsticks and the Table Manners to Go With Them.* NY: Thomas Y. Crowell.

Knowlton, Jack. (1985). *Maps and Globes.* NY: Harper and Row/ Trophy Book.

Manley, Deborah. (1989). *It's Fun Finding Out About Long Ago.* NY: Derrydale Books.

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